

Power concentration and corruption: part 4 – magical thinking about democracy



[Julian Assange](#)

A trillion dollar protection racket.
– Angus Deaton¹

*Elections corrupt politicians, not the other way around... A conspiracy that implicates everybody is not a conspiracy.*²
– Bianco Luno

[Part 1: democracy](#) | [Part 2: representation](#) | [Part 3: voting](#) | [Part 4: power concentration](#) | [Part 5: Lottocracy](#)

The topic is one in political philosophy. It is not about politics. The kind of corruption we address here is the kind that emerges from flawed political institutions, not from individual politicians or parties of them. The corruption is the kind that, perhaps with better political institutional planning, might be

1. Nobel Laureate in economics and author, with fellow economist Anne Case, of [Deaths of Despair](#). This is how Deaton describes the unholy alliance between health care, capitalism, and the electoral process as practiced in the U.S. in the second decade of the 21st Century.

2. “Bad apples?” No, the barrel they are in insures decay... See, for instance, “[Bad Apples or Bad Barrels? Zimbardo on ‘The Lucifer Effect’](#).” Eric Wargo, *Association for Psychological Science*, August 1, 2006. The import here is not that psychological proclivities cannot be resisted, but that *external* structural conditions make it virtually impossible. These facilitate material “capture” of politicians. Further, see the section on Dan Ariely’s work on lying and cheating below.

avoided or substantially mitigated. “Elections,” for example, “corrupt politicians, not the other way around.” This is, in great part because, in an election, politicians, despite their failure to represent in other ways,³ are truly representative of their constituents in one important way: *they are no more, nor less, liable to corruption.*⁴

It couldn’t be otherwise if you believe in democracy. If, rather, you believe politicians are a superior class of persons and, unlike you and me, are immune to corruption, then they can’t very well represent the inferior class comprised of their constituents, including you and me. They are supposed to be selected from among us, the constituents. *Whatever defects we have, they must have to. That’s part of what it means to be “a democracy.”*

So then political constituents – *us* – must be to blame for the corruption, since we are the pool – the species, at least – from which politicians are selected.⁵ Given the quality of the government we have, which we have been arguing in the last three parts of this examination of “electoral representative democracy” is not very high, the individual integrity of those comprising the electorate, the voters, must leave much to be desired.

What might be done to improve the situation? The dysfunction must stem either from something intrinsic – irremediably built into us – the voting class, or it must be a deficiency in our conditioning or education. We’ll be assuming something like the latter since the former – the suggestion the demos in a democracy is *beyond* repair – may be prematurely pessimistic. We are not quite (yet) forced to conclude the democratic game is over and accept the autocratic, oligarchic, or anarchic alternatives.

Suppose we were to undertake educating the public to their proper role in governance, since this would seem to be an obvious place to start. Then, we might ask: why hasn’t this happened a long time ago? Probably, because, like any ambitious and complex project, such an education would be a major investment in terms of time, money, commitment, etc. Lives would be interrupted, and without vast moral and economic support, the personal costs of becoming sufficiently expert in governance *for each of the whole lot of the demos* would be too high. We are used to deferring and delegating to experts, and it makes sense in most areas of life to do so. So why not in governance? Again – *why not defer to expertise in governance?*

Is there something different about governance that precludes treating it like surgery or rocket science? Ultimately, there is. While complex problem solving certainly requires difficult to acquire expertise, desiderata does not. You may need an expert to help you get what you want, but if you need one to tell you *what* you want, anything remotely like democracy is ruled out. What’s the point of asking your opinion when you are incapable of having a sensible one? Delegating agency is not compatible with the supposed core virtue of democracy: that governance *should* stem from wishes of the governed *because the governed have a dignity that must be respected. That dignity consists in their capacity to reason their way to knowing what they want.* Drop this qualification, and autocracy or any of the many forms of oligarchy will do better at *good governance* – the “stated” goal of *any* sort of government at all.

...

3. See [Part 2](#).

4. We look at evidence for this below.

5. Supposedly.

We have been discussing concrete problems surrounding the conceptually baroque idea of “electoral representative democracy” in earlier parts of this series on the contemporary political condition. There are serious problems with each of those concatenated ideas taken individually. The etiology of the successive problematic layers required elucidation. We offered some. This time, we back away from the trees to look at the forest, and examine the relation between “concentrations of power” and corruption, and why large-scale *electoral* human institutions *inevitably* fail. These fail to accomplish their stated goals to the extent that they cease to be properly described as “democracies.” That power corrupts is a cliché, but contemporary concentrations of it border on the supernatural in the magnitude of their corruptive capacities. Density of power distorts ethics and politics like gravity does space and time.

Because of its (still) prominent position in the world, the resources we draw on in this discussion refer mostly to the United States. However, the forces at work are not confined to any one nation-state. They are global – for the same reasons economies are global. The same dynamics are evident in nearly all developed Western liberal democracies. And developing nations with democratic pretensions should take note: this is what is in store for them because the erosion of governance ideals is tied to economic advancement or any arguable semblance of it.⁶

A note about our normative agenda

When we say “fail” we mean fail to be, in the end, *morally* justifiable. We do not necessarily mean fail to be *politically* successful. Even apart from whether *any* human political institution is ever more than temporarily *successful for some*, the ultimate concern here is the question: is it defensible on ethical – i.e. universal – grounds. Ultimately the place from where we are judging “justifiability” is moral. Slavery can, and has often been, *politically and economically* justified, but it is, according to nearly every moral theory, unjustifiable. *Thus, the normative hierarchy we are assuming⁷ in this discussion is: first ethics, then politics... then everything else, up to and including economics.* Ethics sets the first and last normative agenda. Everything else in human affairs is some kind of expediency, some accommodation to our humanity and animality.⁸ This is important to note for anyone who sees things first through political or economic agendas. Morally speaking, when it comes to *fundamental* values – Adam Smith and Karl Marx were not nearly as far apart as is commonly believed. Both seem to have suffered from unwarranted optimism about human capacity.⁹ Many of their political heirs seem to have lost sight of this. Our discussion is not, ultimately, about capitalism vs socialism, left vs right, progressive vs conservative, etc... Before we get far enough to consider any political agenda, we need *first* to understand something of the nature of those to whom we seek to apply the agenda: *humans as we know them to be.*¹⁰ We have been a long time evolving, and while there is much we still don’t know

6. Patently democratically non- or dysfunctional nation-states such as North Korea, Venezuela, Russia, etc. have problems so easy to notice they are distractions for the rest of the world. Rather, we address received beacons of so-called “democracy.”

7. We will later give an argument for the assumption of this normative hierarchy.

8. There is no suggestion here that the expediency is avoidable. Only that it cannot be used to water down what morality requires. Political philosophy is a concession to our animality.

9. Smith thought people were *fundamentally* altruistic: left to their own devices, they *will* harness selfishness to *other*-regarding ends. A moral sense theorist, like David Hume, he regarded us – most of us, most of the time – as fundamentally benevolent creatures. Marx thought solidarity with a species-being was a deep and durable human possibility. He thought self-interest could be subservient to an immanent capacity for identification with a group. Both, in my view, were wearing rose-tinted glasses.

10. Can any such knowledge about “human nature” escape a political agenda? Even to suggest there is such a thing as “human nature” may already be so motivated. We will have more to say about that in what follows.

about ourselves, there remains much that is plain-as-day to anyone not born yesterday. We will try to hold only to these, hopefully, platitudinous assumptions.

...

Some of the questions we will ask in this part:

What are “concentrations of power”? How big and widespread are they? It appears concentrations of power are necessary when governing millions because of the many interests in need of management. This much seems unavoidable. But why do they inevitably degrade to *morally* unjustifiable large proportions – that is, why do power concentrations *always* foster corruption? Or why is the relation between such concentrations and the degradation of ideals *inevitable*? What is the mechanism?

Why belabor the problems with “electoral representative democracy”?

The trajectory of this discussion is informed by the need to make the radical remedies (even the desperate ones) we suggest in the last part of this series worth discussing. It is to justify the need to even consider them. It is always reasonable to avoid deeply disruptive or invasive procedures to cure ailments in the absence of careful examination of the need for such. That’s why we are spending so much time spelling out what is wrong with “electoral representative democracy” – the “electoral” part, especially. Throughout most of this five part discussion we have been taking the desirability of democracy for granted. Representation, of some sort or other, seems practically inevitable. But the *electoral* element may not be. We need to isolate, if possible, the malignant tissue in this ideological organism – “electoral representative democracy” – then see if the risks in trying to excise it are worth it.

So in the final part in the series we explore possible solutions – or at least justifiable reactions (whether or not they are solutions) – to the global political condition of what is called “electoral representative democracy.” What would have to happen to break the “iron law”¹¹ that dictates *inevitable* corruption of human attempts at institutions of government? – We ask this now and, in the final part of this discussion, consider answers.

There is a massive barrier to any change, we submit: concentrations of power.

Potent groups

The power of a community derives from its control of material resources or from the sheer number of its constituents, or both.

11. See the Robert Michels note in Resources below.

Regarding the number: the psychological constructs which enable solidarity of uncountably¹² large groups, however, is subject to the eroding effects of other, specifically anti-social or negatively-social, aspects of *collective* human nature. Patriotism, tradition, etc., enable and promote solidarity in communities which aids their survival as such, but it also entrenches and absconds their flaws. The self-interest of successfully cohering groups replaces the self-interest of individuals. And, unless communities, by their nature, are immune from moral censure, the wrong they do in serving themselves is magnified beyond that of any one individual. The very same selfish impulses that group solidarity was devised to manage reemerge in grander, more potent, form. The only thing worse than an individual malfeasance is a *self-validating* group of them. *Self-validation, without accountability requiring transparency, is delusional.* Each part of the composite “electoral representative democracy” becomes delusion. We do *not* have a democracy. Whatever it is we do have is *not* representative. And elections are worse than a distraction from these facts, they perpetuate and exacerbate the delusions.

Ideally, there should be *no* power concentrations of *any* kind because of the abuse these foster – or, alternatively, if there must be, there should be *one and only one such concentration*: that consisting of the whole of the represented and governed community. Everybody has to be in the same power space relative to everyone else. *In a democracy.*

But mass psychological constructs, conscious or unconscious, are especially ripe for exploitation by those in a position to do so, and institutionalized concentrations of power are in such a position. The impulse to exploit does not go away, magically, because all those around you share your prejudices. Quite the opposite. Formations of “deplorables” are just waiting for the vagaries of any given power concentration to demarcate and target.

A political space outside *any power concentration at all* or *any number of them* will result in perennial tension and conflict, as in a Hobbesian state of Nature,¹³ where each individual fends for her- or himself (and God or nature or vagary pits itself against all) – *only artificially scaled up*. There is reversion to “a dog eat dog world” but with progressively nastier and bigger dogs.¹⁴ Solidarity coops natural self-interest for ends, greater than those of individuals but smaller than those for the whole class of the morally relevant. Governing groups whose size falls between that including the entire class of the governed (direct democracy) and one individual (autocracy) whose tenure is power-based create out-groups primed for persecution.¹⁵ Since a group including *all* may be impractical and *autocratic* rule is

12. “Uncountable” here means large enough to exclude the realistic possibility of epistemic intimacy. See [Part 2 on representation](#). “Epistemic intimacy” is a blanket term for conditions in which it is possible for people to know each other, hear each other out, understand where the other is coming from – deep residual disagreements notwithstanding. Forms of such intimacy include personal acquaintance but also *meaningful* representation: women representing women, representatives of the same socioeconomic class, to have the same chances as anyone else of having one’s view represented in a position of power, etc.

13. “Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” Thomas Hobbes, [The Leviathan](#) (1651), The First Part, Ch. 13.

14. The solution we will propose in the final part of this discussion involves, among other things, keeping the dogs small *and* limited in their freedom to form durable packs while promoting a realistic chance at epistemic intimacy.

15. More on this below.

too subject to intolerable arbitrariness, the next best thing is one where there is a *realistic* chance that *anyone* may be called to represent others for a *fixed* tenure – in whose length the happenstance of power plays no role. The upshot of this discussion, ultimately, will be something like this:

In a more ideal governance than what is anywhere in evidence today, you will have as much a chance of serving as law maker as any other among your fellow governed for, say, three years. That's it. Then, you are out forever. Nothing else about you – not your social or economic class, competence, intelligence, connections, motivation, skills, or experience – is worth making an exception of you. *Not in a democracy.*

This insures meaningful representation, and avoids uncontrolled arbitrariness and inevitable capture and entrenchment. More on why the need for “a realistic chance” in the final part...

...

The point is not to eliminate perennial dissension (there are good reasons why some measure of conflict is humanly salutary – resistance *can* give pause for consideration and deliberation to those not naturally inclined), but to *manage* it. Micro power concentrations (necessary and inevitable, as in a Hobbesian state of nature, if only they can acknowledge their vulnerability without seeking to exploit that of others) are what require management, not hypocritical attempts at their elimination. “Hypocritical” because of inflated optimism about human nature. Management, yes – but *not by out-sized, institutionalized, power concentrations*. Because these invariably shield themselves from accountability. They are sufficiently empowered to prevent the requirements for accountability and cannot be motivated to forswear the exercise of this power. *What's in it for them?* We are still waiting for a satisfactory description of what such an incentive or mechanism, given what humans are like, might be.

...

Are we being *too* pessimistic about the prospects of democracy of the conventional *electoral* form we are familiar with? A growing number of historians, political scientists, evolutionary biologists, sociologists, psychologists, political philosophers, economists, and (perhaps) less lucidly, the general public – the *demos*, i.e., the governed – are beginning to think not.¹⁶ The handwriting on the wall is discernible. Being born yesterday is not consistent with noticing what has, *and is*, transpiring.

Aren't there well-known effective mechanisms for managing politically necessary power concentrations? (Campaign finance reform, eliminating gerrymandering, regulating lobbying, etc.?) We

16. Typical explanations of low voter turnout insinuate laziness and ignorance. But it is not irrational, ignorant, or irresponsible to redirect one's energy in more constructive directions than the voting booth. See, for starters, Jay Leno's video clips [here](#) and [here](#) which sample the political and civic understanding of ordinary Americans on the street. No doubt, these were selected for comic effect, but see the well-attested research cited here: “[Democracy and its discontents: an alternative to elections](#)” and that alluded to by Alex Guerrero [here](#). If anything about political sociology is well-established, this is: most people do not take voting very seriously. Political philosopher Jason Brennan, focusing on the ethics of voting, suggests there are very good reasons for such widespread indifference to electoral matters. He concludes that picking up even *one piece of litter* on your street does more to improve your community than voting in large elections – it would be one of a myriad of actions with more constructive civic effect than voting. People who don't vote may express their civic-mindedness just by striving to do well whatever it is they do (be a good surgeon or grocery store clerk). Moreover, you may have a moral duty *not* to vote because of the harm your vote may do, he argues. And this applies to very many of us – including both the *uninformed* and the *too-well informed*. See the Brennan references in Resources below.

will consider this possibility in the final part of this topic when we discuss what, if anything, may be done about ailing contemporary implementations of democracy.

Power concentrations stand in the way. An example of how dense a power concentration can be:

The “trillion dollar protection racket”

[Angus Deaton](#) – Nobel Laureate economist, defender of liberal democracy, open markets, and generally, the ideal of capitalist economics – recently described the health care system in the United States that way. The phrase “protection racket” is from discourse on organized crime. This is a pretty heady accusation coming from someone who is not antagonistic to free markets. Many from more distant reaches of the political spectrum have insinuated as much long before Deaton, but the professor emeritus at Princeton and his economist co-author, Anne Case, are widely acknowledged as among the mainstream authorities on health care and economics, all politics aside. They are not socialists or disbelievers in the free market... What can they mean to suggest by such alarming words?

They mean to allude to such facts as that for *each* of the 535 members of the U.S. Congress there are four full-time and well-healed lobbyists *from one industry alone* hovering over their shoulders to make sure these law-makers make no changes that would disturb the carefully-crafted network of laws and policies designed to serve the financial interests of the health care industry. By “industry” is meant not only associations of medical professionals, i.e., doctors, pharmaceutical companies, medical equipment companies, health insurance companies, hospitals, medical schools, health research institutions... but also what we can only now describe as extensions of this industry, including government regulatory agencies, “non-profit” foundations, national and increasingly international: more specifically, the FDA, CDC, the World Health Organization, up to and including the United Nations and its health-related arms. Further: up to and including the legislative bodies of nearly all Western nations and many non-Western ones as well. Governments, elected or otherwise, formerly counter-forces, are fast becoming co-opted. And, finally, how are you supposed to be informed about this? Don’t go looking to mainstream media. Guess who owns them?¹⁷... Hence, the need for “trillions.”

Case and Deaton hint, but do not spell out, the implications quite to the extent we will here. They do not appear to doubt the *fundamental* adequacy of the prevailing conception of “liberal democracy” to fix such things. We are not hampered by such fatih, so we will draw things out further:

Why this expansion of “the industry”? Because these public actors (e.g., governments), as well, have become dependent on the resource-control wielded by the industry. They are in on the “racket.” They need money in proportion to the ever increasing grandness of their goals. Power aggrandizement knows no instrumental bounds when coupled with a normative philosophy – the conviction that you are doing the right thing. Those with money *must* be consulted on those goals. Those with money merge their interests with any ends they take on. Matters are expedited if the goal-setters and the goal-enablers increasing become the same people. *Why not? It helps with expedition.* Thus national governments first,

17. “[How a Company Called BlackRock Shapes Your News, Your Life, Our Future.](#)” Jeannette Cooperman, *The Common Reader*, September 15, 2021. “Five giant corporations now control most of what we see and read. The smallest number of media companies are now reaching the largest number of people in U.S. history, and the strongest critical [analysis](#) I can find is not in mainstream media, but in the student newspaper at Vassar. Which gives you some idea of the pickle we are in.” Needless to say, much of *non-mainstream* media suffers from having been classed as sources of varieties of mis-, dis-, and mal-informationism. Much of it – sadly, if understandably – is correctly so described. So what are you to do?

followed by international power-wielding bodies, are enlisted to craft and promote “common” goals,¹⁸ or what technocrats consider is best for us all. *Why not? It helps with expedition.* Technocrats, the “specialized knowledgeable,” come from where? They come from “the industry” (in this broader sense), the principle stake-holders, where else? They are the proven “know-how” people who merge with the electorally-legitimized “know-what” people to set agendas. *Why not? It helps with expedition.* Together, “they can rule,” so to speak.

The formal justification, “the normative philosophy,” for such a concentration of power in one industry such as health care goes something like this: health is a universal and fundamental value. It comes, and *ought* to come, before nearly any other human interest.¹⁹ In a global world in which what any part of it does affects all parts, it is no longer expedient to tolerate petty impediments to such near-universally recognized human goals. If governments and other power centers – local, national, or international – or any of their strictures pose such obstacles, these must be eliminated, co-opted, or circumvented. Governments which do not conform are deemed petty and provincial – even illegitimate. Like their citizens, taken individually, governments with regulatory qualms, too, are fast labeled too self-serving, requiring transnational moral censure.²⁰ We need to get past them. “Soft-power” is the new enforcement tool in the liberal democratic world.

A lot of coordinated power accretes in one place, involving the movement of *trillions* of dollars – out of some pockets and into others...

Good. It’s nice to know that very resourceful, capable, knowledgeable, successful by any material measure, people care about our health... What could go wrong?

“Conspiracies”... who needs them?

... when plain, old-fashioned greed and self-aggrandizement suffice. A “conspiracy,” for the record, is usually defined as what happens when two or more folks pool ideas and resources for nefarious purposes. To have a realistic chance of success, members of such, must have and deploy serious amounts of intelligence and cooperative instincts; the bigger the joint venture, the more so. (The “nefariousness” of their purpose is a matter of perspective. We focus on how conspiracies work, *if* they work.)

But one of the problems with *successful* conspiracy is that intelligence, cooperative instincts, and resources do not always go together. Some resourceful people are not very smart. Some smarter-than-average folks do not have deep-pockets. It happens. And, while it is true that, as a species, we are social animals, remember, we as a species are *anti*-social ones, *too*. Our problematic nature assures that planned conspiracies fail because they do not always apply the highest recruitment standards, *i.e.*, they mistakenly attribute like-mindedness to all their recruits. Dissension results. The constellation of factors that would prevent this carelessness – critical skills and an accurate assessment of the variety and complexity of humans ends generally – is scarce. Conspiracies fail, in other words, for the same

18. Everybody likes winning. “Win-win” goals are a no-brainer. Right?

19. “National security” is another favorite excuse to demote other human concerns. “Emergency ethics” kicks in. Creating and prolonging emergencies are highly effective tools in the care and nurture of power concentrations: weapons of mass destruction in places where they are not (post-9/11), genocidal viruses on the loose (Covid-19), “only” a few bad apples on Wall Street, war on crime, on drugs, etc...

20. Take, for example, Sweden during the recent pandemic.

reasons associations for beneficent ends *also* fail. *They miscalculate and inevitably exclude those who would point this out to them.* Negative people are shunned by all.²¹

The problem, we propose, is more organic and less premeditated than any set of would-be conspirators – or conspiracy-mongers – are likely to acknowledge. In brief, conspiracies are unstable, and inadvertently sow the seeds of their own dissolution.²²

It will be said: who cares about durable stability? Inevitable dissolution? It's enough if the plan works well enough for a time for those invested. History is full of stories about those for whom it has worked well enough for generations.²³ What starts out ill-motivated may, and often does, become, with time and luck, the norm, even a widely acknowledged and hallowed institution. So?

We don't need conspiracies to explain anything. If it happens that this or that small group of persons plots for nefarious ends, this is not especially relevant here. For corrupted and corrupting projects to work at the scale we are suggesting, entire demographics must be recruited. This is not as hard as one may think. Modern scientific research on ordinary humans assures us they are quite corruption-prone. Yes, welcome to an imperfect world where justice and fairness are only seasonal.

True, history shows there is something that may bring extreme and entrenched corrupted governance to its knees rudely, and it is not pretty: violence, if things get bad enough... But it would be nice to avoid things getting that bad. Bad apples sometimes get their comeuppance. Then, for a time, things get better, but post-revolution "Springs" are notoriously short-lived. Do we really have to put up with the threat, and sometimes reality, of a blood-bath at regular intervals? Surely, as a species, we can learn from past mistakes and take preemptive steps to minimize such likelihoods. Can't we take human vagary into account and design a system a little less predictably unstable? Granted, human rationality is overrated, but, knowing what we know, can't we do a *little* better? Maybe we need occasional reminders of what everybody already knows.

"A conspiracy that implicates everybody is not a conspiracy."

Gertrude Stein once heard her friends in conversation repeat the old saw about leading a horse to water not necessarily entailing it would drink... "Yes, but most horses drink," she reminded.

21. See [some of the eight writeups](#) for discussion on dissension and how it has been treated in biomedical sciences in the midst of a pandemic – or likely to be treated in *any* perceived crisis.

22. Thus, they are not that philosophically interesting, despite their importance from a social science and historical perspective.

23. E.g., hasn't "electoral representative democracy" in the U.S. worked ok for two and a half centuries? The miserable countries typically cited as foils to support this assertion do not impress.

Dishonesty as a social norm

On the assumption that elected public officials are representative of those who elected them, they must be liable to corruption because ordinary people are highly liable to corruption. The difference between these officials and ordinary people, the people who supposedly do the electing, lies not in their proneness to corruption but in the amount of damage their corruption may do. The greater the concentration of power, the more damage that may be done. *Electing* representatives, in the guaranteed absence of the epistemic intimacy due to the scale of an election, is the beginning of a durable concentration.

Elected officials are invested with power. That's the purpose of electing them. But successful elections at the scale of electorates of many millions require *vast amounts of material* power, without which, they won't happen. The material power (i.e., money or any resource that can be converted to or from money) must come from elsewhere. The amounts needed demand appealing to dense concentrations of resources. But concentrations of material power do not emerge through any legitimizing democratic process. The corruptive tendencies of elected officials makes them dependent (and, humanly, unavoidably so) on these *unelected* material power concentrations more able to achieve outcomes than they – with only their legitimized authority to brandish – are in a position to effect. “Your vote is nice, but how about money, too, lots of it, please?” Combined, official *elected* power and effective – but not electorally-legitimized – *material* power distort pretensions to expressed ideals, such as those implied in the hallowed notion of “democracy”: namely, that, “*in a democracy*, the governed govern.”

A critical premise in the argument for the irrelevance of conspiracy, as yet unargued here, is that *ordinary people are highly liable to corruption*. Is this true? The empirical question has been answered affirmatively.²⁴ Big time. Dan Ariely, researcher in psychology and behavioral economics at Duke (also at MIT, Princeton, Stanford, et al.), has done extensive experimentation on the topics of deception and self-deception.

Experiment 1. *lying*

Ariely describes an experiment in which subjects were asked to pick which side, top or bottom, of a tossed die would determine how many dollars they would get. Before the die is tossed, the subject is asked to decide which side, top or bottom, of the die will determine their reward. So, for example, if the subject chooses the top side, prior to the toss, and the die lands with six up, they will get six dollars. If, prior to the toss, they choose the bottom side and the die lands with six up, they will get what the bottom side indicates: they will get one dollar. However, they are to make the decision as to whether top or bottom side will determine their reward, *before* the toss, *and keep the decision they made to themselves* until asked. *After* the result of the tossed die is evident to both subject and researcher, the researcher asks the subject, “which side did you choose to determine your reward?” The toss event happens once only for each subject then the researcher moves onto another subject.

As Ariely, puts it, people are incredibly lucky. Almost 90% of the time they guess before the toss that the side with the highest reward will be the one they chose (the decision being kept to themselves). But it is statistically impossible that 90% are telling the truth. The experiment was conducted thousands of

24. This reminder may be helpful for those born since empirical investigation became the norm for asserting any kind of verification. Historically, of course, that *it is human to be a liar and a cheat* is hardly news. The French moralists of the 17th and 18th Century, such as [La Rochefoucauld](#) would hardly have been surprised by the current science. Going back further, [Diogenes of Sinope](#) sought long and hard for an honest man on the streets of Athens *with a lantern in broad daylight*.

times with different groups and demographics. The results were consistently the same: 90% of the time people correctly guessed the most profitable side if they – *and only they* – were privy to the information as to which side they had chosen prior to the toss.

If they had, for instance, been asked to write down their choice prior to the toss so that the choice was evident to all concerned, the percentage of correct choices would drop closer to a predictable 50%. It isn't surprising that people generally tell the truth when there is any possibility their statement might be verified. However, *when there is no such possibility*, as in the case of this experiment, and the effective information governing those stakes is privy to them – *they usually lie*.

What would the percentage of lying be if the amount at stake was 60, 600, or more dollars? Would people be more honest, or less? Some intuitions support it going either way. Interestingly, Ariely's research shows that lying when the amount of money at stake increases actually *decreases* lying and cheating. Serious vice seems to either irk consciences – or lowers self-esteem. More subjects might think, "a little fib here or there, is ok, but..."

More remarkable, perhaps, is that a small percentage consistently *didn't* lie. What's up with these people? Were they not very smart, were they just scrupulously honest even at their own material expense? Note that the conditions of the experiment are such that *individual* honesty could never be determined, let alone celebrated. *No honesty or dishonesty could be pinned on any given subject*. There could be absolutely no reward for being honest (except, possibly, a righteous night of sleep). No one could ever know that you, specifically, were honest – or dishonest, your more self-interested and sensible side will remind you.

Experiment 2. *stealing*

Will people steal *if there is no possibility of being caught*? Yes, most folks will steal.

Ariely describes another experiment in which subjects would pay themselves what they thought their time as experimental subjects was worth. They were given an envelope with 50 dollars and asked to state what they *should* be paid for their time and then to take *that amount* from the envelope unobserved, leaving the rest of the money in the envelope, and, on their way out, depositing the envelope in a bin full of other envelopes from other subjects.

A high percentage of the time, people took more than they themselves said they would. The money left in the envelopes did not tally with everyone taking out *what they said they would*. Since there was no way to pin stealing or honesty on any given individual, there was no possibility of being outed as a thief. Under these conditions, many people steal. Not everybody, of course, some are too stupid or morally squeamish, but definitely most.

Lying about lying

An old joke in logic goes like this: a logic professor pronounces the basic rule that a *double-negation* equates to an affirmative, that is, to say "it is not true that it is false that" *something or other* is informationally equivalent to asserting *something or other*. Similarly, in grammar: my saying "I don't want not to go" amounts to saying "I want to go." The negations cancel each other out. When a student asks, perhaps thinking there should be symmetry, if a *double-affirmative* equates to a negation, the

professor says no. Logic doesn't work that way, he assures... A student at the back of the lecture hall mutters loudly, "Yeah, right."

Logic and grammar may have us believe the rule about double-negations canceling each other out, but natural language and behavior does not. Sometimes double or multiple negations do *not* cancel each other out. Sometimes they mean to *emphasize* the negation. And sometimes double-affirmations are sardonic.

On top of that, human psychology intervenes with its own pragmatic, not strictly deductive, inferences. What we infer from the discovery of a deception can vary, depending on our own psychological tendencies or conditioning. If I lie about lying to you, does this make me truthful or just make me an unreliable source of any information? Suppose I intend to lie to you by giving you information that I have every reason to believe is untrue, but, in fact, I am mistaken: what I tell you is exactly true, unbeknownst to me. Am I truth-teller or a liar? Which of these depends on something about you, not me.

Duke professor Dan Ariely is an important figure in the study of dishonesty. A *New York Times* columnist, an *NPR* commentator, his TED talks are all over the Internet, a veritable "rock star" in the science of behavioral psychology and economics. His books are bestsellers and have been immensely influential in the burgeoning field of behavioral economics which studies actual in contrast to rational economic cost-benefit calculations. Everybody, in business, in politics, in government, in life wants to know how *not* to be duped. Ariely has been at the forefront of deception research, telling us, among other things, that we are all very likely liars and cheats whenever we think we can get away with it. He and his colleagues published seminal papers and books documenting claims about behavior around deception and self-deception. They have learned there are techniques for manipulating such behavior. One such is that people who are primed by being reminded up front to be honest in supplying information *before* supplying it, rather than *after*, are more likely to be honest by about ten percent. On a tax form, for example, you might be asked to swear and sign at the end of the form that the information supplied above is correct. Work by Ariely and company suggested, however, that more honest information is gathered if the swearing and signing happens at the *top* of the form, before the information is given, rather than at the end, after it has been provided. (Trial courts have been doing this right: they ask for swearing-in *before* mounting the witness stand, *not after* the witness testifies.) You can imagine why the IRS and insurance companies, for instance, may find such insight interesting. This is called moral priming.

The data for the famous study came from different sources but all of it has come under a cloud: some of the studies producing the data could not be replicated²⁵ while another study's data looks plainly concocted.²⁶ This is serious.²⁷ But nobody, not the authors of the study nor the sources of the data, is taking responsibility for anything but carelessness, leading to the suspicion that somebody, in a position

25. The "replication problem" is a well-known plague in scientific research when done by humans – and who or what else does science (yet)?

26. See "[An Influential Study Of Dishonesty Was Dishonest](#)," Christian B. Miller, *Forbes* August 30, 2021, and "[A Famous Honesty Researcher Is Retracting A Study Over Fake Data: Renowned psychologist Dan Ariely literally wrote the book on dishonesty. Now some are questioning whether the scientist himself is being dishonest](#)," Stephanie M. Lee, *Buzzfeed*, August 25, 2021.

27. As long as we are expected to take science seriously... It becomes tragic when lives are at stake as in the official "science-based" responses to the pandemic, which we have addressed [elsewhere](#). Loss of confidence in medical research and practice has far-reaching and, potentially, tragic consequences.

of academic authority, was *lying – deliberately deceiving* – about something that for years was taught as gospel to students and taken quite seriously by important organizations and institutions – and maybe even the general public....

Recently, it has come to light, and admitted by Ariely and company to some degree, that at least some of the data about this “priming” behavior was itself – at least very misleading – if not quite deliberately fudged to make it come out a certain way. Somebody altered the data supporting the deceptive behavior used to arrive at the pointed conclusion... and evidence points to Ariely, himself.

We note that Ariely’s work cited earlier in the earlier section about our propensity to lie in the absence of accountability is *not* impugned by *this* scandal on the efficacy of priming. This is part of what makes adjudicating scientific claims problematic. That someone lies in some situations does not mean they lie in all. We are mistaken to infer that. The thesis in the study about swearing and signing *before* informing being more truth-conducive than post informing *may* still be correct. We just can’t conclude this from the evidence proffered. *We are just wrong to believe anyone without verifying*, that much we can be sure of. But it is hard to avoid that. It is hard because verifying authoritative data means overcoming a lack of transparency and this requires major expenditures of time and resources. In time, yes, the truth may be outed. Then, again, we *want* to believe people with good reputations. In the meantime, great damage is done. And we live in one “meantime” or other *all the time*.

The irony: a study about dishonesty turns out to be less than honest. For present purposes, to learn that one of the leading authorities on dissembling dissembles is icing on the cake. *A god who sins in his spare time does not inspire confidence, let alone awe.*²⁸

There is, however, one very clear lesson, human fallibility aside: *the absence of transparency is an invitation to transgress ethical norms*. We hardly needed Ariely’s experiments. If we needed hard evidence for the claim, how about the whole history of the human civilization – not to exclude evolutionary prehistory?²⁹ But for those who want experimental as well as observational empirical evidence (*i.e.*, history), we have it now.

How being smart can help you lie and cheat better

Opacity lubricates deception. If there is no way you can get caught, you are very likely to lie especially when the stakes are perceived to be pretty small. Doesn’t rational self-interest entail this? But what if there *is* a way you might be caught *but it is very unlikely* if you thoughtfully take precautions to prevent it, and the stakes are high enough to make the risk worth it? This complicates matters. It implies a nuanced approach to telling the truth, how much of it, and how to frame it. Intelligence helps get this nuance right. Stupid people are easily outed.

28. We need to be careful here. The cloud hangs over Ariely’s research on moralistic priming, not on the earlier discussed work on wide-spread lying and cheating. If we are rational, we must scrutinize our judgments and not succumb to slippery slopes, otherwise we fall into an *ad hominem* fallacy. The kind of liars we need to be concerned about don’t lie all the time. It would be easy to spot them if they did. It’s because too often they tell the truth that the real damage is done. We just don’t know when.

29. Animals do it, too. Lie, cheat, and steal, I mean. Being moral is in no way a guarantee of survival, let alone of flourishing. Flowers may be beautiful, but their function is the brute *marketing* of reproduction – they didn’t evolve to adorn your dinner table. The normative side effect of both goodness and beauty is evolutionarily gratuitous.

Transparency – by which we mean here *holding nothing back about knowledge, motivations, decisions or behavior* – makes lying hard. It makes it so that only the very savvy stand a chance of getting away with deception. Experts in a field are better equipped to *successfully* rationalize to themselves and others their less than sterling behavior.³⁰

“Most of us are not evil but we don’t like being alone either.”³¹

Ariely thinks most of us are motivated by high self-regard at least as much as pure self-interest. His studies show that as the value of what is at stake rises, say, from 6 dollars in the die experiment to 60 or 600, the rate of lying goes down. It seems people don’t want to think of themselves as bad people, even when they can get away with it. Sleeping well must have some value for them, too. So, while they may lie, cheat, and steal *a little*, even given the opportunity, most will *not* exploit the situation to their full advantage. We are not saints but we are not evil people either. There are, of course, a few, who are just plain evil, but these are statistically insignificant. *And that’s the immediate point. At scale, it’s the numbers that matter: a million small-time liars and cheats amount to more harm done than a really bad apple or two. There is evil in numbers.*

Moreover, it matters a lot *what* the folks around you are doing. If you know they are fibbing, your conscience relaxes, and you join in to a significant extent. The path of dissembling is blazed. We are herd-like that way. Safety also, we hear, in numbers...

Moreover, again, Ariely’s work also show that it matters a lot *who* is doing the bad stuff. Are they a member your group or are they a part of an out-group? Interestingly, if an *out-group* member is exposed as a liar or a cheat, it makes members in your group *more* honest. But, if the exposed liar or cheat is a member of *your* group, it actually *increases* lying and cheating in your group. “I am better than those in that deplorable group. But if people just like me are doing something, well then, it must be ok...”³² Or some such reasoning must be operative, no?

Transparency and concentrations of power

So, ordinary people, in general, can be, more or less, trusted to be liars and thieves. But mostly under conditions in which there is little or no possibility of being held accountable. People aren’t stupid, most, anyway. Under conditions in which there is *some* probability of being held accountable, we would expect the likelihood of malfeasance would diminish somewhat. And we would expect that reduction of likelihood would vary with the reliability of the mechanisms of accountability.

The Ariely experiments didn’t test how much the real possibility of being held accountable was effective. But accountability no doubt has some effect. We occasionally learn from our mistakes, and having to face bad consequences, surely has something to do with that learning. What is clear from the

30. Philosophers, who focus on ethics, for example, are no better at being moral than specialists in other areas of philosophy. “[The Behavior of Ethicists](#),” Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust, *Blackwell Companion to Experimental Philosophy*, 2014. However, they might be better than most at reasoning their way to excusing that behavior, as lawyers and judges may their legal opinions. “[Rationalization in moral and philosophical thought](#),” Eric Schwitzgebel and J. Ellis, J., 2017. In J.-F. Bonnefon & B. Trémolière (Eds.), *Moral inferences* (pp. 170–190).

31. Bianco Luno, *leçons en ténèbres*, (“lessons in darkness”) forthcoming.

32. For example, if voting fraud by a Republican is exposed, subsequent publicity will tweak for more honest behavior among Democrats. But, if it is a Democrat who is exposed, it raises the likelihood of unscrupulous behavior among fellow Democrats.

experiments is that the total absence of transparency is not conducive to honesty. A high degree of opacity is conducive to dishonesty, the experiments allow us to strongly suspect.

Concentrations of power, public (political entities such as governments) or private (corporate economic power centers), are not in a position to be fans of transparency. It is hard to see how it could be in their interest, except superficially and instrumentally. To the extent they need worry about accountability, and the transparency that leads to it at all, it is because it is instrumental to their material ends and to sustaining the concentration of power. Honesty is just part of the cost of doing business. Good business practice demands that you *not* spend *unnecessarily* on the productions of profits. Honesty that does not promote the bottom line is waste.³³ Public relations, of course, are important when the public has a say in the viability “going forward” of the concentration. In theory, in democracies, this is how it is supposed to work. When (known) dishonesty reaches a threshold, electoral action may be taken. In the material corporate world, the consumer is king, you need them to buy what you are selling. Buying is a behavior. Behavior, understanding it and manipulating it to certain ends, is what behavioral economics is all about. You need not be much concerned about accuracy as to *why*, ultimately, they are buying, only that they *are* buying. If getting them to think that their interests are served by buying what you are selling is good for business, then getting them to think so must be a priority. Marketing is important to this end. Deploying science-based tools to create or enable consumer desire is modern Business 101.

Publics, no less than their constituents, have psychologies. The latest research into these has found effective tools for shaping these psychologies to the liking of those able to deploy the requisite tools and substantial resources. The 2009 book [*Nudge Theory*](#) by Richard Thaler (Nobel laureate behavioral economist) and Cass Sunstein (a well-known legal scholar) marshals techniques on how to get people to do what you want them to do without being overly rude, violent, or disrespectful about it.³⁴ Nudge theory has had a huge influence on corporate marketing as well as political parties, since these, too, are deeply interested in getting people to behave in certain ways such as getting them to vote “appropriately” or “undeplorably” *en masse*. We don’t need draconian laws and goon-squads to coerce people anymore. Such heavy-handed tactics are medieval or third-world. We, in liberal democracies, are too civilized to stoop so low.

Everyone does it. Everyone lies or embellishes or tucks the truth in a bit. It works to achieve many human goals. Varnish does wonders for truth. Pigs do, in fact, look more charming with lipstick. Call it nudging, seduction, manipulation, “choice architecture” or whatever – but we are deeply sensitive to enticement and appearances. Nudge us, don’t twist our arms.

But nudging is premised on how, *empirically-speaking*, we behave – *not* on how, *rationally*, we know we *ought* to behave. The latter requires no-holes-barred critical inquiry, creating discomfort to optimism.

Ignoring this normative demand is – from non-consequentialist moral perspectives – immoral. And, at least, half of our moral intuitions, as an empirical matter, are *not* consequentialist.³⁵

33. Corporate and abstract bodies do not have consciences liable to getting overwrought.

34. Not that the core idea is new, but the scientific rigor backing old suspicions is impressive. [Edward Bernays](#), nephew of Freud, made a name for himself hocking sophisticated psychological techniques for shaping public relations early in the 20th Century.

35. In 2013, David Chalmers and David Bourget conducted [an empirical survey](#) of the professional philosophical community on where they came down *fundamentally* in many areas. The survey showed non-consequentialist ethical intuitions noticeably more prevalent. Since these are basic intuitions, it is likely this non-consequentialist bent also

The prevention of transparency

What happens when power centers are insulated from the judgment of those whose lives are affected by the exercise of their concentration of power?

It is often argued that secrecy is indispensable for certain institutions to function. *Public* governments have, and must guard, their state secrets for the sake of the security of their citizens. Between real or generated threats such as terrorist attacks (9/11) or ostensibly biological ones (the Covid-19 pandemic), states of emergencies further license the keeping of state secrets and the suppression of information not conducive to a mission or course of action (via, for instance, official designations of “misinformation,” “disinformation,” for example).³⁶ These designations are determined, not through some well-informed deliberation on the part of a public – the demos, “the ruled,” but by an electorally-sanctioned concentration of power which defines what government is and what it may do.

Private concentrations, on the other hand, such as national and transnational corporations must protect their methods for generating wealth for shareholders (the very reason for their existence), and this depends on their exclusive control over a proprietary *modus operandi* to the extent laws allow. The size and complexity of such institutions requires guarding information that could be used to undermine their respective authority and goals.

Governments, of course, traditionally are in the business of making laws, including those laws governing the modes of operation of private concentrations of power. Private corporate bodies are in the business of making money. But if laws impede the making of money and the money concentrations are dense enough, then, because governments require vast resources, it becomes important to keep the money and the laws strictly separate. But, this has long since ceased to happen. Private concentrations of power have been called “private governments” by political philosopher Elizabeth Anderson³⁷ because, like their public counterparts, they engage in activities with vast effects on the lives of publics. For these *private* bodies, these *publics* are resources, not authorities. Who are the private concentrations of power accountable to? Supposedly, the public ones. Who are these dependent on for exercising their governing functions? The private ones.

characterizes the general populace. Consider, for instance, the distinct prevalence of deontological considerations in jurisprudence and the philosophy of law.

36. In early March of 2023, investigative journalist Isabel Oakeshott released a large trove of intimate communications between UK former health secretary Matt Hancock and other government officials including Boris Johnson, Prime Minister at the time, regarding official pandemic responses. See the interview with Oakeshott at *UnHerd*: “[Isabel Oakeshott: the lesson of the Lockdown Files: The journalist explains how politicians got drunk on power during the pandemic.](#)” The revelations concerning unabashed engineering of public panic early in the pandemic for what can only be described as delight in power-wielding at the cost of lives is historic. The repercussions were global – both directly and because the UK’s response heavily influenced the U.S. response, which affected the rest of the First World, which, in turn, slavishly takes its cues from what happens in the U.S. institutions. The cost to trust in the authority of, not just governments but, more seriously (since governments are not typically at the top of anyone’s list of trustworthy institutions), *science-based* medicine incurred by such official irresponsibility is grave. What will happen when a *genuine* catastrophic pandemic strikes if stories like this prime us with the suspicion that the Covid-19 pandemic was 10% bad flu and 90% political manipulation? These revelations are just icing on the cake of the abuses documented in [our series of critiques of the pandemic response](#).

37. “[Liberty, Equality, and Private Government](#),” (pdf) The Tanner Lectures in Human Values, Delivered at Princeton University, March 4–5, 2015. Podcasts: [interview](#) at *Econtalk*, and extended [interviews with Elizabeth Anderson at Partially Examined Life](#).

The difference between a public and a private concentration of power used to be electoral accountability. The first was subject to it and the second not. As we have tried to show the first isn't so anymore, rather once public concentrations, public governments, are much more subject to private – *still private* – concentrations. In a nutshell, public governments exist to serve private ones and the once source of their authority, the governed, are now mere resources.

What happens when transparency threatens a concentration of power? At worst, consider the [Julian Assange](#) case. At best, “kinder, gentler” techniques are used: pseudo-technical discourse is invented to disabuse the benighted herd of inconvenient insight into the workings of a concentration of power, as described, for instance, by Jacob Siegel in this interview “[The great ‘disinformation’ hoax.](#)” (More examples, arising from the recent pandemic response, can be found in the documentation in our [previous writeups.](#))

Herding nations can be profitable

Entire nations are being herded. The global reach of power concentrations, essentially now public/private mergings, if not acquisitions or integrations, of power. We are living through the demise of the hegemony of nation-states in favor of a global market in their sale and purchase. This is suggested, for example, by [John Gray](#), philosopher and historian of ideas.³⁸ We are not talking Plato's petty city-states anymore. Globalism defines everything. Good and bad.

You want to have a say in your government? Buy something online at Amazon or see a doctor or fill a prescription. By getting vaccinated, for example, you are voting yes to a policy that enables the “trillion dollar racket” described by Angus Deaton, we alluded to earlier.³⁹ *How can you be sure this isn't the case?* Good luck. The *official* resources for you to critically assess your epistemic situation aren't there, and the *unofficial* ones, have been tainted with all manner of self-interest and stupidity.⁴⁰

How are you supposed to know what is good for you? You don't. And can't. Who are you? You are not in a position to know. Instead, a technocratic authority, the head of the CDC or the WHO – just for instance – with great institutional resources and authority, dense enough to bend the ear of elected representatives and appointed authorities alike, is in a position to know. These “knowers,” in turn, are beholden to whom?...

You do not have an epistemic role, yours is to listen and comply.

38. The western notion of “liberal democracy,” as it has previously been understood is dissolving into somethings else: what? The development is addressed in two interviews with eminent philosopher and historian of ideas John Gray at [UnHerd.com](#) by Freddie Sayers: Part 1: “[Revenge of the technocrats,](#)” (the UK and Europe) and Part 2: “[Welcome to the Era of Tragic Realism,](#)” (the rest of the world).

39. Unless, of course, *the science shows* that, for someone with your specific set of comorbidities, more is risked by not availing yourself of a marginally effective treatment. Who is included in this vulnerable group is, by now, pretty clear (if it wasn't from the beginning), but it is far from the bulk of the population.

40. You *should*, of course, invest the time to seek out and evaluate all the resources you can. The fact that this may be impractical for you *further* enables the power concentrations. The fact that you are not likely to do your own thinking is a critical part of their calculation. See also “[How a Company Called BlackRock Shapes Your News, Your Life, Our Future.](#)” Jeannette Cooperman, *The Common Reader*, September 15, 2021. Those who question all sides of a debate often end up risking alienating all, uncomfortably so, as in [Naomi Wolf's apology to conservatives.](#)

Ditto for any authority whose history involves somebody being enabled to win an election for something or other.

But suppose they *really* do know more than we?

As epistemically responsible people, we can't rule this out. Supposing *that* possibility – you concede the defeat of the democratic ideal. Aware or not, you might invoke Plato from 2500 years ago in defense of your position.⁴¹ Few of us are made of the right stuff to ever reach high levels of certainty on these things. Just as some are conceding that on the Internet there is no such thing as *privacy* anymore (intimating we should “get used to it”), there are no such things as *meaningful opinions* on any one's part who has not somehow enlisted in some supportive capacity to a concentration of power. Your individual vote is either a legacy ritual of some sort, a kind of prayer to a now dead and decomposed god – or what?

...

What's in it for those with a stake in real power to give it up?

...

Power, *sufficiently concentrated to entrench itself*, is not compatible with democracy. Human nature, given what it is, under such conditions corrupts democratic ideals. No, particularly, “bad apples” are required. Power concentrations are corrupt (adjective) *and* corrupt (intransitive verb) by tolerating excuses for lack of transparency, thus undermining accountability, which, in turn, leads to runaway abuse, typically ending badly for all concerned. *They enable themselves*. Can anything be done to manage this?

Next time, in the final part of this exploration of the human political condition, we ask what we might do, if anything?

Summing up – an outline of the process of power concentration and corruption

1. A “*power concentration*” is an entity invested with power to control human lives at great scale: the scale of interest here involves nation-states and trans-national organizations. It typically include governments, but also – increasingly and critically – non-government agencies and private corporate bodies as much and perhaps more. A power concentration may be “public” in the sense that it may claim to be accountable to those who invested power in it, as in the case of “elected” governments, or it may be “private” in the sense that formal public scrutiny and control is not part of its description. This last point is important. Because if the accountability is only an appearance, or not owed to an ethically defensible authority, *but claims to be*, then we are going to call this “*corruption*.”

41. Most people can't be relied on to make wise decisions. It's just not in their nature. Only a small subclass may. And Plato saw no path to this changing. In his defense, he was well aware of the abuse problem, and described quixotic (he admitted) mechanisms to mitigate predictable abuse of the situation, most of which, sadly, have been forgotten. A morsel survives in the “separation of powers” motif as it occurs in, for example, U.S. constitutional discourse.

2. Power concentrations happen at the level of nation-states because of the practical need to invest power in intermediaries, including representatives, elected officials, politicians, generally, and, also, in more private expertise and resource centers – such as suppliers of acknowledged material, social, civilizational, or epistemic infrastructure – more specifically: health care, national security, scientific research, educational institutions, news and social media, internet services, for example, (and anything else you can identify as effective at shaping human lives and their quality, not to exclude organized religion or disreligion). Thus a power concentration is a large *cultural* abstraction designed to capture all that determines human environments. Nature has a say in its shape and likelihood, but institutional power concentration is not a *natural* phenomenon.
3. Power concentrations are *unavoidable* at the scale we address.
4. They may be morally neutral to the extent they are unavoidable but features such as their entrenchment are not.
5. Power concentrations require *tremendous* resources to maintain themselves.
6. This obligates them to solicit and accept the requisite resources for that maintenance from sources having them.
7. Those with these resources do not acquire them through any kind of democratically *accountable* process.
8. While early in the formation of formal *political* power concentrations, accountability might be enforced via elections (as in “throw the bums out”), as the concentrations intensify and the need for resources magnifies in proportion to the power intensification, *electoral accountability diminishes* – eventually to token status.
9. The operative accountability moves from being enforceable by democratic elections to accountability to the holders of the necessary resources. This is called “capture.”
10. In the case of public governments, often described as “liberal democracies,” where electorates consist of millions, “democracy” transforms into a very different kind of thing deserving a different name. Most apt, today, is some form “oligarchy,” more specifically “epistocracy” or “technocracy” – rule by the knowledgeable, the educationally (and, usually, materially) resourceful. Oligarchies are, by definition, much smaller than the class they govern.
11. The absence of democratic accountability replaces the will of the governed with the will of the resource holders as the motivating factor in governance.
12. The electorate, as such, becomes increasingly irrelevant except as a resource to be managed by the power concentration which is no longer directly guided by the needs, wishes, or welfare of the governed. (Why should it be?) Indirectly, yes, the electorate still matters. Like a resource matters, but not as an end to serve.

13. The only restraint on complete instrumentalization of the governed is the possibility of violent rebellion. “The governed” vastly outnumber “the governing” more and more as the concentration intensifies. The possibility of violent rebellion looms. This becomes something to consider. It is the only thing that may temper the extent, style, and methods of instrumentalizing the governed.
14. The governed become a resource and an instrument for realizing the goals of the power concentration. The careful management of the relationship between the governed and the power concentration will determine the longevity of the concentration. Wise management will prolong the delicate relationship indefinitely in theory, but, if history is any indication, there will be limits. The situation inevitably becomes unstable and unsustainable. Violence may be forestalled until the day it can’t be.
15. The situation occurs because accountability has shifted.
16. A necessary requirement for any kind of effective accountability of power-wielding is *transparency* to those over whom power is wielded – in a democracy.
17. Transparency is the condition in which all information necessary to assess and regulate the behavior of relevant actors is available to those licensed by the governing scheme – in the case of a democracy, those licensed are *the governed*.
18. The responsibility of adjudicating the concentration cannot be delegated without incurring a regress. Who watches the watchdogs?
19. But the governed, having been instrumentalized, are disabled from demanding and getting the necessary transparency to enforce any kind of accountability. (Take [the Assange case](#).)
20. From the perspective of the power concentration, transparency to the governed is counterproductive to the preservation and health of the power concentration. Transparency can only impede the preservation and augmentation of the power concentration. Transparency becomes anathema to the ends of the concentration.
21. Transparency becomes something to suppress by whatever means necessary. *Actual* transparency serves no useful purpose to those whose behavior will be judged with its help. But the *appearance* of transparency is instrumentally useful to propagate, as it helps with managing discontent.
22. In the context democratic institutions, we define *corruption* as a fall from stated, initially attractive, in this context, *ideals* about respecting human dignity. Governance is thoroughly corrupt when it successfully blocks the principle way of respecting that dignity. Instrumentalization precludes any such respect. Your “tools,” to serve your ends, do not need to know what you are up to. Their epistemic needs may be met with minimal information or even just the semblance of it.
23. Might corruption be avoided while maintaining *elected* representatives? Yes, by electing saints and martyrs. How come we just don’t vote for spotless “good apples”?

24. But these are in short supply in the electorate and since – at least in this regard – representatives are truly representative of their constituents.
25. *Unaccountable* politicians are liars and cheats because their *unaccountable* human constituents are liars and cheats... *Are their constituents liars and cheats?*
26. Yes, many keen observers in the history of culture and ideas have thought and have been telling us so since ancient times (Diogenes of Sinope, La Rochefoucauld, Ambrose Bierce, E. M. Cioran, *et al.*). But now we have science to confirm that most people are liars and cheats. (Ariely) Ninety percent of ordinary people will lie or cheat some *if they have every reason to believe they will get away with it, or if those in their in-group are doing it, or if the moral taint involved seems minor to them, humanly-excusable, and may be seen as expedient to some laudable end, or if it seems some larger uncontroversial cause can be enlisted to help with at least rationalizing it* (e.g., *health*, during a pandemic; *national security*, in the midst of terrorist acts, etc.) Since even powerful and very intelligent persons are also members of the same species as ordinary people, and moral integrity is not so high on the list of qualifications that make elected representatives *successful*, we can expect as much from them. Morally squeamish people can be a drag.
27. There is no better way to insure being able to get away with lying and cheating than to curb transparency. It blocks accountability. Being powerful and intelligent is really helpful at the task of obfuscation. Intelligence can facilitate and augment the depth, sophistication, resilience of corrupt institutions.
28. Stupid people get caught. Jails were made with them in mind. While statistics of white-collar criminality overwhelmingly indicate that well-educated criminals seldom see the inside of a jail. And the cost to society of this kind of crime far exceeds that of street crime by a factor of 10. A good education is conducive to success in any career, crime and corruption are no exception. With a good education, even crime pays. (See “[Boys Kill](#).”) Even so sober an authority as [Angus Deaton suspects](#) organized crime in U.S. health care at almost supernatural proportions.
29. Reform will have a hard time when entrenched power concentrations control all paths to its realization. But, the *appearance* of reform, like the *appearance* of transparency, on the other hand, is highly instrumental and effective at preserving a status quo friendly to the preservation and augmentation of power concentrations. So *talking* about these things is enabling to power concentrations.
30. This is a recipe for obviating “democracy,” assuming it means “good governance by the governed.”⁴²
31. What to do?... Stay tuned for one last session on the demise of democracy and proposals to fix it.

42. The alternative definition, “*majority rule* by the governed” amounts to the same, since the governed are invested with the power to decide what is going to count as “good.”

Resources

1. Writeups for prior Philosophy Club topics related to this one:

- For more on the problem of voting, see our 2016 discussion: “[The dilemma of the disaffected voter: the rationality & morality of voting](#),” where many of the points surveyed here are explored in more detail.
- “[Pitting devils, democracy, and “executive aggrandizement](#). ” See section on what is democracy. Your vote alone cannot check your “representatives.” It takes... see Nancy Bermeo’s list. Trump-bashing is a distraction from the real problem. The conditions for Trump were set decades before his presidency. And things are progressing toward something worse than Trump.
- “[Democracy and its discontents: an alternative to elections](#)” A first try at explaining Alex Guerrero’slottocratic alternative. We will revisit and review thelottocratic idea in the last part of this topic.

2. Older and newer inspirations

The classical references most informing this topic are Plato’s *Republic*⁴³ and the work of Immanuel Kant. We are also working with ideas introduced by a number of contemporary political scientists, moral and political philosophers, legal scholars, and historians of ideas, including:

[Jason Brennan](#)

[Martin Gilens](#)

[Onora O’Neill](#)

[Nancy Bermeo](#)

[Martha Nussbaum](#)

[John Gray](#)

[Elizabeth Anderson](#)

[Anne Case and Angus Deaton](#)

[Sylviane Agacinski](#)

[Alex Guerrero](#)

...and their critics. Some specific links below:

3. Corruption and corrupting environments

“[Five Minutes On: What is Corruption?](#)” New College of the Humanities Senior Lecturer in Philosophy David Mitchell talks on “Philosophy and International Development: What is Corruption?” as part of the How The Light Gets In Festival.

43. See especially Book 6 where Plato’s tries to get at the root of human corruption. Explained especially well by Jeremy Reid [here](#).

Mitchell distinguishes “corrupting behavior” and “corrupt behavior.” “Corrupting behavior” implies “corrupt behavior” but not the reverse. Consider that *petty* corruption is less pernicious than *grand* corruption and the distinction helps explain why. The difference lies in the fact that in two-party corruption where one party offers an incentive to another to effect an ethically dubious outcome, in the case of “corrupting behavior,” a party is *made* corrupt by the situation in a way that in petty or incidental corruption the one pressured to make the bribe is not essentially involved in corruption, rather they participate as a matter of one-time expedience. They do not necessarily buy into this way of doing things. In the other case, that of grand corruption, where the parties *are* conditioned to accept the corruption, there is a buy-in, hence this is a case of corrupting behavior (in addition to corrupt behavior, of course). The distinction helps show why “corrupting behavior” is more pernicious. *It is so because of the norm it sets, and thus the magnitude and range of the consequences...* We add that mass electoral institutions are “corrupting environments,” and, like “corrupting behavior,” share their relative perniciousness. They create powerful institutional norms with devastating effects.

4. Is it possible dishonesty is a human value?

The psychology on what we can safely assume about lying and cheating: “[Dan Ariely Shares the Truth About Dishonesty](#),” and “[The Corruption Experiment](#).” Ariely asks, *what happens if dishonesty becomes a social norm? and is dishonesty a human value?* See also “[Why we think it's OK to cheat and steal \(sometimes\) | Dan Ariely](#).”

5. The most fragile human value: transparency

[His wife’s plea: The case for Julian Assange](#), *Unherd*. Stella Moris, attorney and wife of Julian Assange, searchingly interviewed by Freddie Sayers, makes a case for the necessity of *transparency*. Assange has been 12 years confined and death-threatened by the U. S. authorities for revealing extreme embarrassments of power, kept secret by appeal to “national security” as though *any* state action might escape such suppression. States cite national security as the supreme and incontrovertible value. Moris argues that Assange may be martyred for the cause of an equally critical *counter* need for transparency.

Or they cite states of emergency...

6. Capture

“[Martin Gilens: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America | Affluence and Influence](#),” a talk at MIT by Princeton political scientist Martin Gilens. “The U.S.,” Gilens, concludes as a result of one of the largest studies on the subject to date, “is a democracy in name only.” (Unless you are in the upper 10 percentile of income, “your ballot has less value than your *used* toilet paper,” as Bianco Luno puts it, avoiding too fine a point.)

7. Which flavor of oligarchy?

The western notion of “liberal democracy,” as it has previously been understood is dissolving into somethings else: what? The development is addressed in two interviews with eminent philosopher and historian of ideas John Gray at *UnHerd.com* by Freddie Sayers: Part 1: “[Revenge of the technocrats](#),” (the UK and Europe) and Part 2: “[Welcome to the Era of Tragic Realism](#),” (the rest of the world).

8. Representation by sampling

[“Lottocracy: A New Kind of Democracy.”](#) Alex Guerrero, Henry Rutgers Term Chair and Associate Professor of Philosophy, Rutgers University. Text and video on the lottocratic alternative: “Elections are the heart of almost every modern political system. Alex Guerrero presents a case against choosing political representatives via voting and defends a new kind of political system with a very different heart: one that uses random selection, rather than popular elections, to choose officials.” But the difficulties strewn in the path to sortition from the received wisdom that the hallowed institution of voting is a *sine qua non* of democratic rule are immense.

9. Deals you can’t refuse

Onora O’Neill, [“Between Consenting Adults.”](#) Power differential obviates *proper* consent wherever it exists, O’Neill argues in her classic paper. She discusses it in the narrower contexts of sex and employment, but it carries over to *state* power with a vengeance...

10. Which locates you politically – your genitalia or street address?

[Sylviane Agacinski, *parité*, and the idea of sex-based power differentials.](#) Are human beings so interchangeable that any one may democratically “represent” another without regard to *biological* sex? Agacinski says, no. If the notion of *equality* between people means that women and men may stand proxy for each other, the notion is fundamentally flawed. They can’t. Nature and history reinforce each other in making this point. She suggests, rather, *parity* of power between the sexes. Parity does not presuppose interchangeability or inter-representation.

11. “A trillion dollar racket”

Economist and Nobel Laureate [Angus Deaton claims that educational inequality kills.](#) Divisiveness in modern liberal democracies, most especially in the U.S. – the center of global technocracy, are rooted in educational inequalities which in turn are concentrating wealth beyond social and economic utility. He warns we will have serious reform or face potentially dire consequences. Wonder how Trump was able to achieve political credibility? See an earlier talk by Anne Case and Deaton, [“Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism.”](#)

Deaths caused by educational, economic, *and the consequent political* inequality and despair, already increasing for decades prior to the Covid pandemic, have been exacerbated by the pandemic response of entities who have benefited from the death and suffering of millions worldwide. The pre-existing despair, in turn, conditioned much of the death and suffering due to the illness itself (the *profitable* encouragement of co-morbid vulnerabilities, for example), was made worse by the official pandemic response: lockdowns (throwing 100 million worldwide into poverty: surely that can’t be good for anyone’s health) and experimental and highly *profitable* pharmaceuticals (the full extent of the damage attributed to which is still being revealed: have we forgotten [Oxycontin?](#)). The ascendancy of private (commercial, pharmaceutical, and social media corporate profiteering and pandering) and public (governmental entities captured by the former) concentrations of power is rooted in tightly connected educational/economic/political inequality. Especially so as these concentrated powers, public and private, are *merging* without restraint... The talks by Case and Deaton, while not venturing quite so far as we are here, do help set the stage for the conclusions in this paragraph. As Anne Case put it,

“American capitalism isn’t working for Americans without a four-year college degree. And that’s about *two-thirds* of all Americans between the ages of 25 and 64.” (Emphasis added.) *Two-thirds of all Americans don’t count...* Maybe we don’t care all that much for “democracy” after all. Maybe we have something *better* than democracy... but we can’t bring ourselves to call what it is we have by its proper name... Rethink where the political phenomenon of Trumpism came from. Will it go away when Trump goes away?

12. The “iron law” of democratic dissolution

Robert Michels (1911) called it an “[iron law](#)” that democracies devolve to oligarchies. An anonymous wikipedia author sums it up admirably: “The ‘iron law of oligarchy’ states that all forms of organization, regardless of how democratic they may be at the start, will eventually and inevitably develop oligarchic tendencies, thus making true democracy practically and theoretically impossible, especially in large groups and complex organizations. The relative structural fluidity in a small-scale democracy succumbs to ‘social viscosity’ in a large-scale organization. According to the ‘iron law,’ democracy and large-scale organization are incompatible.” It is easy to draw more than one conclusion from this insight. Michels himself became a fascist. But there are other ways to parse the iron law and extract the truth in it, while treating what ails the practice of democracy. This will involve a critical view on the nature of human beings, manifestly, one not fully appreciated by thinkers like Michels and many others. First, you survey human landscape, then like a structural engineer, you design and build to suit the foundation materials. *You must be clear-eyed about what humans are like.* Something about democracy is morally defensible. We tried in Part 1 to put our finger on what that is. But much of what currently attends it is not: in particular, the popular notion that democracy and elections must go together. *They do not.* Elections at scale are inherently vulnerable to degradation.



Extended writeup for the topic hosted at

[The Philosophy Club](#) in March 2023

– Victor Muñoz

Guanajuato / Seattle